

COMMENT

Digital divisions grow

CARL MALAMUD

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) wrapped up in Tunis recently after debating arcane issues such as who gets to allocate Internet addresses or create top level domains such as ".com" and ".org."

The villain to many and hero to a very few was the United States, which purportedly maintains control over these resources through its creation in 1998 of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Icann), a California non-profit organisation that took over the functions previously administered on a volunteer basis by Jon Postel, one of the founding fathers of the Net.

Preceding the summit were repeated calls to take over Icann's functions and hand them over to a new body. In a midnight compromise, the Tunis summit agreed to create an Internet Governance Forum (IGF). All sides claimed victory.

The reality is the new forum will be a debating society, a way to continue the summit debates over the long-term. The IGF will have no formal authority, and will join dozens of other debating societies.

Was anything accomplished in Tunis? Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the MIT Media Lab, brought an amazing new device with him and unveiled it to a rapt audience of journalists.

This device is a \$100 laptop that can be powered by AA batteries or even a hand

crank. Negroponte's aim is no less than to make sure that every child in the world gets a laptop and to that end he's set up a non-profit venture and has been touring the globe convincing heads of state that they should buy these devices.

Negroponte said he's going to spend the rest of his life focusing on this project. In a plenary address to the summit, he said that every child should have a pencil and the pencil of the future is a laptop connected to the Internet.

Bridging the digital divide was the theme of the summit and those concerned with Internet "governance" seem to have forgotten that theme.

The reality of the Internet is that nobody rules it. It is a bottom-up network, not a top-down hierarchy.

The Tunisian government spent \$27 million to put on the summit. Instead of playing host to the world, they could have bought 270,000 laptops.

Over 12,000 people converged on Tunis for this event, and my maths says that the total cost in exhibitor fees, plane tickets, hotels, and myriad other expenses is well over \$200 million. What if the heads of state had simply cancelled the summit and purchased 2 million laptops?

That would have made the digital divide just a little less deep.

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